

Jaishankar's visit

Vague responses to two crucial issues

THE Indian external affairs minister's maiden visit to Dhaka, was not one that garnered high expectations as it is considered to serve the protocol of formally bringing an invitation to our prime minister from her Indian counterpart and completing the preparatory work for it. Even so, we cannot help but feel disappointed by Mr S Jaishankar's visit if not by what was said but more so by what remained unsaid.

Two issues need to be mentioned here—the case with regard to water sharing agreements and the issue of the NRC—two issues of great concern for Bangladesh. While Mr Jaishankar expressed India's desire to find a "mutually acceptable" formula to share water from 54 upper riparian rivers, he was rather vague regarding the Teesta water sharing treaty. When asked about it he merely said that there was no change in India's commitment to the position it had taken. The last time we checked, the two countries could not sign a deal during former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in 2011 because West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had vehemently opposed the deal. And in 2015, the then Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said that there would be no deal without the West Bengal government on board. Is this the position Mr Jaishankar is referring to?

His response "it is an internal matter of India" with regard to the National Register of Citizens in Assam that has left out around four million Bangla-speaking people at risk of losing citizenship and facing possible expulsion from India, is rather confusing. What will be the fate of the four million people who are excluded? Will they be pushed into Bangladesh? We raise the question because statements from Indian leaders, including the home minister, all but indirectly hinted so. Also, the cut off year being 1971, leaves little doubt of what may happen.

The Indian external minister's stress on easing the process for people's visits to the countries, assurances to address the border killing issue, readiness to provide assistance to the Rohingyas in Bangladesh and enthusiasm regarding enhancing India's economic partnership with Bangladesh were some of the more positive outcomes of the visit and we thank him for them.

We look forward to our prime minister's visit to India and hope that her meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi will address the contentious issues and result in sustainable solutions that will give a genuine boost to the cordial relations the two countries share. Given our extremely warm relationship with India, we have great expectations from the upcoming summit.

Farmers deprived of fair price

Fingers pointed at officials, middlemen

AGRICULTURE and food security, both of which have been cornerstones of government policy, have resulted in robust crop production in the country. Yet, we find that farmers in Sunamganj's haor areas have not been getting the benefit of the various procurement policies that the state has in place. Allegedly, middlemen have been making use of fake farmer cards to buy paddy. This malpractice, along with others, is apparently depriving genuine farmers of the benefit of selling paddy as listed farmers and getting the government-fixed price of Tk 1,040 per maund.

Although only seven percent of paddy growers are to be enlisted in the government procurement, the enlistment process is handled by representatives of local government bodies like union parishads. The Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) then arranges lotteries and selects farmers from whom the paddy will be procured. Farmers allege that there is foul play, i.e. only farmers with party links are shortlisted to be eligible to participate in the lottery. Although this has been denied by the authorities, one cannot rule it out because there is no monitoring mechanism available at present.

Since only 25,000 out of an estimated 384,000 farmers in Sunamganj get enlisted to supply paddy at government rate, the rest are forced to sell their crop in the open market at about Tk 520-650 per maund. What it all boils down to is that a fraction of farmers is benefiting from government procurement of paddy and the rest are left to their own devices. Middlemen, wholesalers and mill owners can, and do, offer prices that are nearly half the rate offered by the authorities, and this means that the price per maund of paddy is worth less than 1 kg of Hilsa.

If we take into account that there is politics in choosing which farmers qualify to sell paddy to the government and the existence of fake farmer cards, it is also possible that farmers will start losing interest in growing paddy next season. That will have serious ramifications for food security in the country, and it is time the DAE looked into these allegations seriously.

Slums: Whose problem is it anyway?



TASNEEM TAYEB

THE recent fire incident at the Chalantika slum in Mirpur has perhaps been the kindest to the victims: claiming no lives, only their life's possessions. The fire that broke out

around 7:20pm on August 16, 2019, engulfed more than a thousand shanties, leaving thousands of people homeless. It took 24 firefighting units hours to reign in the insatiable flames. A lot of the slum dwellers had been away to their native villages to celebrate Eid-ul-Azha, serendipitously escaping the blazing fires. Concerned authorities have also been quick to contain the situation and provide relief to the affected people, with DNCC operating treatment facilities for the victims.

According to a UNDP report, slum dwellers account for more than 33 percent of the capital's population. For these rootless millions, life can be precarious, and rife for exploitation. For instance, despite poverty being their calling card, shanty dwellers actually pay inflated rents for their cramped, fragile and at times fatal accommodations. The report cites a 2017 study by Bangladesh University that reveals that slumlords on average earn Tk 47 per square foot per month for the accommodation provided, almost twice the amount a resident has to pay for a formal, decent accommodation in even upscale areas such as Dhanmondi.

The shanty residents also pay exorbitant amounts to get basic utility services such as electricity, gas and water. Oftentimes, the costs are covered by the governments, the risks—the fatal risks of makeshift infrastructure—are borne by the residents, while the benefits are pocketed by the slumlords.

Take the recent fire incident at Chalantika slum for example. Although the exact cause of fire is yet to be ascertained, it has been suggested that the fire spread fast due to faulty gas supply mechanism. The slumlords had been illegally supplying gas to the residents through plastic pipes. According to a report published in this daily, Rezaul Karim, assistant director of the Fire Service and Civil Defence in Dhaka, has this to say about the incident: "We found illegal gas connections in the slum when we were conducting search operation [on August 17]. The gas was supplied through plastic pipes. The plastic pipes melted in the heat, releasing the gas and helping the fire spread faster to adjacent shanties."



Dwellers inspect the remains of their possessions after a fire engulfed Mirpur's Chalantika slum last week.

According to a report published in Prothom Alo, the slum dwellers had each been paying Tk 500 for this faulty and illegal gas connection, which amounts to Tk 75 lakh per month. Unfortunately, since the gas was being provided illegally, not a single penny reached the utility providers—Titas Gas in this case.

According to the same report, almost Tk 1.5 crore was being paid every month by the slum dwellers for gas, electricity and water connection. The money was allegedly being collected by the henchmen of two political hotshots of the ruling party, who divided it between themselves.

It wouldn't take too much of a leap of faith to assume this case to be fairly representative of the goings-on of the nearly 3,400 slums of Dhaka. According to a report published by this daily in 2017, there were at least 10,000 illegal gas connections in Korail slum, which were being provided by two syndicates. They collected more than Tk 5 million every month from the shanty residents. Galvanised Iron (GI) and plastic pipes have been used to supply gas to the residents, which increases the possibility of fire hazard manifold. Korail slum has witnessed multiple fire incidents in recent years, with some attributed to gas explosions.

Apart from such obvious risk factors, sanitation and hygiene, security, and unhealthy living conditions are also part of the myriad problems slum dwellers face day in, day out. At all times, their perilous existence hangs in the balance, stuck between a rock—the insatiable hunger of their willing hosts—and a hard place—the threat of eviction in a moment's notice.

In the midst of all these issues, one wonders why successive governments in the last few decades have not taken measures to provide concrete shelter to the slum dwellers. After all, these people form a significant workforce, part of the reason why our economy enjoys its low-cost advantage to this day. If nothing else, these are enfranchised citizens of our country, guaranteed by our constitution to live "free from exploitation", part of "a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens."

Not that the government did not undertake projects to address the plight of slum dwellers. In 1998, the government did initiate the well-intentioned Tk 341 crore Bhashantek Rehabilitation Project in Mirpur, which was meant to provide 7,560 flats for the urban poor. The project was never quite the resounding success

it was hoped to have been. Financial irregularities, mismanagement, and corruption took their toll, and soon the project had to be shelved, and along with it the possibility of a sustainable and affordable housing for the urban poor. As tends to be the case, it is they who would ultimately pay the price.

It is a strangely cyclical life, the boom of the bright city lights and the promises they hold, followed by the bust of exploitation, eviction and mortality. There are many possible solutions that have been tried, to varying degrees of success, around the world—solutions we could learn from. But looking at them, we see a common thread that holds all such shanties together—a confluence of vested interests that has a built-in machine designed to systematically exploit millions of vulnerable households for the profit of a few, feeding this vicious cycle in perpetuity.

It is a complex problem, but perhaps the solution starts with a simple step: accepting ownership of this challenge as a society, and demanding the requisite will from our public representatives to strike a blow that will not just dent but also shatter this hungry machine.

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Rohingya children staring at a bleak future

DAVID SKINNER

13-YEAR-OLD Fatima (not her real name) is acutely aware of the importance of school. She fled Myanmar two years ago with nothing. She now lives in the world's biggest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar with her parents, two sisters and grandfather. She has faced difficulties most children her age never will. She wants to be a teacher, but not just any teacher. She wants to teach girls because when girls are educated, they teach others.

In August 2017, over half a million Rohingya children were forced from

solidarity, the people of Bangladesh gave them sanctuary and a sense of security that they had lacked in Myanmar. The world came together to support the people of Bangladesh: individuals, aid agencies, governments and the UN system mobilised to make sure that child refugees and their carers had somewhere to live and the opportunity to exercise their basic rights.

Because of this mobilisation, the tragedy of a forced exile did not lead to a humanitarian disaster. A large forest area in Cox's Bazar was cleared, makeshift shelters were erected, children were fed and outbreaks of disease were controlled.

But life for Rohingya refugee children like Fatima remains bleak. She is so eager to learn but has no opportunity when it comes to secondary or tertiary education. By only being able to provide a rudimentary primary-level education in the camps, we are failing Rohingya refugee children, robbing them of the chance to serve their communities and indeed the world at large. We are robbing Fatima of her dream to become a teacher. It's not acceptable.

The shelters children live in are temporary, made of bamboo and plastic sheeting. They wouldn't survive a strong wind, let alone a cyclone. One in 10

ago have also had their lives turned upside down. A quiet, rural network of villages and small market towns has had to deal with the arrival of a million people. Homes and villages surrounding the refugee camps are much more susceptible to the impacts of flooding and landslides because of the degradation of the surrounding forest. Healthcare services that were already at full capacity prior to the crisis are now overloaded. Resentment is on the rise. Children from the host community are uncertain about their futures too.

Yet two years on we are no closer to a solution, no way out, no avenue for the 600,000 children living in the camps in Cox's Bazar. The prospect of a safe, voluntary and dignified return to Myanmar is remote. No third country is coming forward to offer resettlement. There is no prospect of a significant, settled relocation within Bangladesh.

Rohingya children are said to be turning into a lost generation—a cliché often associated with long-term refugees. But they are not lost. The world knows where they are. They need support now to ensure they can learn, that they are safe, and they are healthy. They must not be forgotten. To do so would not be acceptable.

Rohingya children must also have a sense of hope: something to suggest that they will one day be able to fulfil their aspirations. The government and people of Bangladesh have done a great global good in sheltering the Rohingya population the last two years. They need continued support from across the world.

But long-term solution to this crisis lies in Myanmar. Conditions must be created to support the Rohingya's safe and voluntary return to their homes. For these conditions to exist, perpetrators of crimes against the Rohingya must be held accountable. Second, the Government of Myanmar must stop the conflict in Rakhine. Third, in line with Article 7 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, Rohingya children should have a clear and unambiguous nationality.

The lives of all children in Cox's Bazar—Rohingya and Bangladeshi—have been affected by this crisis. We owe it to Fatima to give her a chance in life, to support her in realising her dreams; and not become a victim of a conflict she had no part in.

The world must do better.

David Skinner is working as the Team Leader for Rohingya Response at Save the Children in Bangladesh.



Rohingya children stand in a queue at a registration camp in Cox's Bazar.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

their homes. It was the biggest mass displacement of people since the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The Rohingya children told us that they have witnessed rape, torture and killing. Some were raped and tortured themselves; many saw their friends and family getting killed before their eyes. All they could do was run while their homes burned.

With very little, they made their way across the border from Myanmar to Bangladesh. In a remarkable act of

Although a major health emergency was averted, more than a million refugees continue to suffer.

Save the Children has been working in Cox's Bazar providing support to the most vulnerable people, both refugee and Bangladeshi children, in health, nutrition, hygiene, education and—perhaps above all—child protection. To date we have reached more than 400,000 children with our life-saving interventions.

children are still malnourished. Fears of trafficking, drugs and violent crimes in the camps make children feel unsafe. Simple tasks like fetching water or going to the latrine after dark can be dangerous as children navigate through the poorly lit camps with little in the way of security. This is not acceptable either.

But it's not just Rohingya refugee children who need our help. The children in the communities who welcomed the Rohingya two years

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Are we really growing?

Despite Bangladesh's high economic growth, both the agricultural and industrial sectors have been unable to create enough jobs, which is raising serious questions about the significance of the country's growth.

Economic growth and economic development are not synonymous. The former is the increase in the production of goods and services within a nation, for a specific period of time.

Economic development emphasises on both qualitative and quantitative growth of the economy. It is denoted by an increase in the per capita income of every citizen, with the quality of living standard being a major indicator of it. Therefore, economic development should be given more focus for Bangladesh to truly progress. Balanced and uniform development is more necessary than just achieving high economic growth. Our experts should come up with policies that would ensure the trickling down of our growth to even the lowest quintile of individuals in our economic pyramid.

Md Zillur Rahaman, by email